A Study Based on "Why Bother with Truth" by J. Beilby and D. K. Clark

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1 Why this study?

- Help to resolve personal confusion and conflict about truth and knowledge.
- Provide a rational basis for our faith.
- Help in understanding contemporary culture and thought.
- Help in outreach and evangelism.
- Improve understanding of philosophical premises of our own discipline (e.g., engineering).
- Help in integration of faith in our discipline.
- Provide the foundations for further study on relevant topics; e.g., Christianity and science, creation vs. evolution, "right for you but not for me."

Disclaimer:

- I am *not* a philosopher.
- These notes are merely a summary of the booklet by Beilby and Clark, with a few points inserted.

Exercise: Are these statements true, and how do you know?

1. If all Norwegians have blue eyes, and I am Norwegian, then I have blue eyes.
2. I exist.
3. The earth is round.
4. Jesus rose from the dead.
5. God loves me.
6. Black is beautiful.
7. The Aryan race is superior.
8. The sun rises in the east.

2 Introduction

- Socrates (470–399 B.C.):
  - "The unexamined life is not worth living."
  - Pursued the truth about unchanging moral principles that lead to good life.
- Gorgias (Sophist): Nothing exists; or if it does, it can't be understood; or if it can, it can't be expressed.
- **Skeptical Question:** Since we disagree about so many things, do we *really* know what we *think* we know?
- *Skepticism*: the doctrine that all knowledge claims are suspect or unsupportable.
- This study is a journey through history, examining key people and their philosophical views on truth and knowledge (*epistemology*). Each is trying to find *truth* and overcome *skepticism*. Their views all have valid points to make, so we must tread very carefully!
- Introduce characters: Mary, Peter (father), and Paul (son).
- Two main philosophical views: *modern* and *postmodern*.
- No matter what you think of these views when we study them, in some way or other *they form the underpinnings of how each of us approaches life*.

3 Modern Skepticism: No Knowledge Without Evidence

René Descartes (1596–1650)

- Set very high standards for what counts as *knowledge*.
- Either we achieve absolute *certitude* or we give in to *skepticism*.
- Influenced by early developments in science and mathematics, especially geometry.
- Descartes distrusted human senses.
- Build knowledge based on *reason* alone: *rationalism*.
- Rationalism: begin with absolutely certain starting point, carefully move to absolutely certain conclusions.
- Thought experiment: What happens if I assume that a powerful demon is deceiving me at every moment? Do I still have knowledge?
- Even in the worst case, "I'm being deceived. Thus, I'm thinking. Therefore, I exist!" (*Cogito ergo sum.*)
- Descartes thought that he had overcome skepticism.

Snags in Descartes's ideas:

- Following Descartes's method, Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) and Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) arrived at *different* conclusions about reality.
- Mathematicians discovered *competing* geometries (based on different starting assumptions).
- Kurt Gödel (or Goedel) (1906–1978): His *incompleteness theorems* showed that axiomatic systems that are sufficiently rich to describe interesting aspects of reality also contain "truths" that cannot be proved!

Francis Bacon (1561–1626)

- Attempted to understand scientific method.
- Relied on human senses (opposite to rationalism): *empiricism*.
- Bacon thought he had overcome skepticism, because trusting the senses is obviously reliable.

David Hume (1711–1776)

- Argued that following empiricism rigorously leads to skepticism: To be absolutely certain, we must limit our belief to what we can *actually experience*.
- Hume's famous discussion of *causation*: We cannot deduce what is cause and what is effect; we can only experience isolated events.

Isaac Newton (1642–1727)

- As rationalism and empiricism ground toward a negative result, *science* was enjoying smashing success, thanks in large part to Newton.
- Alexander Pope: "Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night: God said, *Let Newton be!* and all was light."
- Newton's approach was neither purely rational (like Descartes) nor purely empirical (like Hume); it combined both.

The Enlightenment (1700s)

- Golden age in modernism.
- Intellectuals shared a central goal: happiness and liberty gained through social progress guided by reason. This dream required shaking off the social influence of religious traditions and superstitions from the past (which often led to war).
- Science emerged as the primary form through which human reason would solve social dilemmas and create a bright future.

More recent implications

- By late 1800s, science dominated Western culture as the only authority of rationality: *scientism*.

- By early 1900s, emergence of *logical positivism*: All knowledge should meet the standards of empirical science. Broad implications in many disciplines.
- Goal: prove every belief. *Logic* provides the means to be *positive* about beliefs.
- Focus on language: specify criteria by which we can decide which words have meanings and which don't.
- *Verification Criterion of Meaning*: for a word or sentence to be meaningful, it must be verifiable by the five senses (empirically).
- Example: *tree* has "meaning" but *God* does not. Therefore "God loves me" doesn't even get to be called *false*; it is just *meaningless*.
- *Evidentialism*: For a belief to be *knowledge*, it must be supported by evidence.
- According to evidentialism, everyone has a rational and *moral* duty to believe only those claims that are supported by sufficient evidence.
- Evidentialism, though not a new doctrine, was reinforced by the prominence of science.
- Notice that only science produces knowledge that meets the requirements of evidentialism and positivism.
- If a belief doesn't fit in with well-established scientific beliefs or isn't discovered through normal scientific practices, then it isn't rational and doesn't count as genuine knowledge.
- Conclusion: Every person *ought* to be agnostic about religious claims.

Summary: Key ideas in modern skepticism

Evidentialism: Every belief must be supported by adequate evidence (otherwise, we lack integrity, even morality!).

Positivism: Only assertions that are verifiable by the senses are meaningful.

Scientism: Science *alone* produces rational beliefs.

Skeptical Question: Do we *really* know what we *think* we know—especially in religion—when our beliefs are not properly based on empirical evidence?

Implication: Modern skeptics hold that religious beliefs never clear the very high crossbar that any knowledge must leap to be counted.

Example: Peter (father): "Unless believers can give scientific evidence for their private, religious ideas, they really shouldn't believe in God."

4 Postmodern Skepticism: No Knowledge, Only Perspectives

- If you think modernism is scary, wait till you see *postmodernism*. Modernism stresses rationalism, absolutism, and positivism. Postmodernism sees these as wrong-headed!

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)

- Initially tried to follow Liebniz's rationalism.
- After reading David Hume, Kant awoke from a "dogmatic slumber" to create a new and different epistemology (to overcome skepticism).
- Kant's approach: both the senses and the mind contribute to human knowledge (recall Newton's scientific approach; but Kant's is different).
- Recall Hume's discussion of *causation*: it's impossible to know that one event causes another just be observing them.
- Kant's argument: By observing events, it *is* possible to know that one causes another, because *causation is a category that is innate to the mind.*
- Categories are principles and concepts that are hard-wired into the mind.
- Categories in the mind stand ready to receive and structure the facts of experience, and experience fills the categories with content. Both elements work together to produce knowledge.
- Kant's synthesis brilliantly answered Hume's challenge, leading to a revolution in epistemology. Kant believed that he had answered skepticism.
- People generally assumed that the *world shapes the contents of the mind*, but Kant said that the *structure of the mind shapes our view of the world.* This reversal was to have momentous implications!

Snags in Kant's ideas:

- Kant's approach requires distinguishing between *reality as it is* (theoretical knowledge) and *reality as it appears to be* (practical knowledge). Kant was satisfied with practical reason as a guide to living. But this distinction opened a door to deeper skepticism.
- Why was Kant satisfied with practical reason? Because he believed (naively) that all human minds are structured in a similar way (i.e., have the same categories), and hence would arrive at the same knowledge, given the same empirical evidence. But what if different people have different categories?
- In the centuries since Kant, people came to believe that the categories of the human mind can differ widely from time to time and place to place.
- Implications on knowledge of God: it is no more than knowledge of the human self, a human invention based on religious needs and passions.

- Implications in other disciplines:
  - Psychology: God is a psychologically inspired father-image [Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)].
  - Sociology: God is a concept created by the bourgeois class (financial elite) to hold down the proletariat class (poor and destitute) [Karl Marx (1818–1883)]. "Religion is the opiate of the people."

The Postmodern view:

- The idea of universal mental categories is a vestige of modernity.
- Our mental categories are particular and specific, grounded in history, tradition, culture, and language.
- Speakers of different native languages view the world through the lens of their own language. English and Swahili aren't just distinct languages; they're radically different systems of thought.
- *Linguistic turn*: fundamental shift in how people look at the source or origin of the categories or structures by which a person interprets the world.
- Renounce *universal reason* and celebrate a smorgasbord of *particular forms of logic*.
- If knowledge means true beliefs about the way things really are, then we have no knowledge at all!
- Not only can't we "know" God, we can't even "know" the physical world.

Filling the postmodern vacuum:

- The postmodern rejection of absolute truth led to a vacuum, which was filled by a variety of thoughts.
- Pragmatism:
  - Adaptation of a nineteenth-century philosophy
  - "America's one true contribution to philosophy"
  - Truth = whatever works (or is useful)
- Postmodern pragmatism even judges epistemological questions by whether or not they are useful. Example: it is *useful* to define *truth* as a *representation of reality* (hence, pragmatism is true).
- Richard Rorty: Truth is "what our peers let us get away with."
- Jacques Derrida: *deconstruction*—all language is metaphor (and therefore does not refer to *reality itself*).
- Michel Foucault: people make truth claims because it gives them power and privilege. So all truth claims should arouse suspicion. Skepticism is no longer the unhappy consequence of a failed search for truth—it's a tool for protecting the downtrodden.

- Friedrich Nietzsche: *nihilism*.

Summary: Key ideas in postmodern skepticism

Historical/cultural/linguistic relativism: Historical and cultural factors affect what we take as valuable, what we think we know, and the standards we set for knowledge.

Denial of absolutes/metanarratives: Knowledge claims are merely individual accounts or stories ("narratives") of the way we see the world. There is no "metanarrative" that explains or gives context to all other stories.

Pragmatism: Truth = whatever works or is useful.

Skeptical Question: Do we *really* know what we *think* we know, when there is no higher viewpoint beyond *your* perspective and *my* perspective?

Implication: Postmodern skeptics hold that religious truth claims (and indeed all truth claims) are impossible and inappropriate.

Example: Paul (son): "It's naive, arrogant, and oppressive to believe that the Christian God is the one true God and that all other gods are illusions."

5 Interlude

Some observations:

- Ideas matter: attitudes of intellectuals and philosophers work their way into everyday living.
- Think of examples of how modern and postmodern skepticism permeate everyday life.
- Typical person today mixes modern and postmodern positions: e.g., skeptical about religion but not science (modern), but at the same time relativistic, pragmatic, and tolerant (postmodern).
- We waiver back and forth between belief and skepticism.
- We do not consistently apply philosophical positions, e.g., we insist on having "scientific proof" for some claims, but happily accept other claims without "proof."
- The knowledge theories we have studied each have their valid points.

Skepticism isn't all bad

- "The unexamined life is not worth living." (Socrates)
- Doubt puts gullibility on a leash.
- *Global* skepticism: doubts every belief. Makes no sense. Global skeptics give equal treatment to the ultra-trustworthy and the completely unreliable.
- *Local* skepticism: doubts some particular belief (also called *critical thinking*). Valuable.

- Denying global skepticism doesn't necessarily lead to intolerance.
- There are many things we cannot know; we should be careful about what we believe. "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully know." (1 Cor. 13:12)

6 Answering Modern Skepticism

Preliminary remarks:

- Behind every modern skeptic's rejection of claims (e.g., existence of God) is an implicit standard for what rightly counts as genuine knowledge, even if the skeptic doesn't really give much thought to this standard.
- Recall the theses of modern standard of knowledge: evidentialism, positivism, and scientism.
- Modern Principle of Knowledge: Beliefs qualify as knowledge only if they are (1) evident to the senses, (2) rationally self-evident (like $1 + 1 = 2$), or (3) the kind of knowledge to which we have special, guaranteed access (like "I have pain in my knee").
- Modernism equates knowledge with *certainty* and *provability*. Sounds reasonable; but is this a problem?
- Modernists' criteria for knowledge are not acceptable!

If the modernists' criteria for knowledge are correct, much of what is legitimately known would no longer count as knowledge.

- For example, I cannot *prove* beyond a shadow of doubt that the world has existed for more than five minutes.
- I also can't prove that I have a mind.
- But do the modernist criteria really show me that I don't know any of these things? Certainly not.
- The criteria are too high and overly stringent.

Modern skeptics tend to cheat; they fail to follow their own rules.

- The modern Principle of Knowledge is intended to ensure the elimination of false beliefs. But can we *know* this *Principle of Knowledge*? (No, it fails its own test! "Self-referentially incoherent.")
- The claim that "Only scientific statements are rational" is not a scientific statement, but a philosophical claim (and hence would itself be irrational and false).
- Can the senses guarantee certainty? "What is real? How do you define real? If you're talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, what you can taste, what you can see, then real is just electrical signals interpreted by your brain." (Morpheus, in *The Matrix*.)

- Scientism fails to acknowledge that science depends on important philosophical assumptions:
  - That an external world exists, and that it's orderly, stable, and properly explained by numbers.
  - The laws of logic, mathematics, and language.
  - The general reliability of the human discovery and knowing processes.
  - Positivism: there is no difference between something that exists but is not observable and something that doesn't exist at all.
  - Scientists originally applied positivism to molecules, because they were too small to detect directly. Around the same time, Einstein published his paper on Brownian motion, affirming the existence of molecules.
  - As Einstein put it in his *Autobiographical notes*, "This is an interesting example of the fact that even scholars of audacious spirit and fine instinct can be obstructed in the interpretation of facts by philosophical prejudices."
- Scientism fails to acknowledge that science is laced with values:
  - Simplicity (Occam's razor): "When you have two competing theories making exactly the same predictions, the one that is simpler is the better."
  - Naturalism: Stephen Hawking explains in *A Brief History of Time*: "We could still imagine that there is a set of laws that determines events completely for some supernatural being, who could observe the present state of the universe without disturbing it. However, such models of the universe are not of much interest to us mortals. It seems better to employ the principle known as Occam's razor and cut out all the features of the theory which cannot be observed."
  - Science cannot explain the decisions of scientists.

Modern skepticism, when taken as a way of life, a way of living in the world, is very troubling.

- Is agnosticism really intellectually virtuous? We can't withold judgement about ultimate questions forever.
- William James's illustration of a climber hiking a steep mountain trail and confronting a crevice too wide to jump. What are the options?
- Saying "I don't know" to God is *functionally* the same as "No."
- "If you choose not to decide, you still have made a choice." (Rush.)

Summary: Modernists put the crossbar of knowledge so high that no knowledge claims can clear it, and this means it's impossible to ground any knowledge—*even scientific knowledge.*

7 Answering Postmodern Skepticism

The postmodern critique of modernity is right about several things:

- Pursuing absolute rational certainty is misguided: equating knowledge and certainty will doom our search for truth.
- Historical and cultural factors do shape what we think we know.
- Much of language we use is subject to misinterpretation—there's no such thing as *one* obvious meaning for each single sentence.

But full-blown postmodern skepticism takes several serious missteps:

- The cultural, linguistic, or historical nature of him knowledge does not imply that knowledge is not important, not possible, or not necessary. Knowledge of ambiguity doesn't prove that *all* knowledge is ambiguous.
- The traditional notion of truth—as what corresponds to reality—is not easily discarded. Rorty, Derrida, ad Foucault want to undercut this definition. But in what sense are their criticisms *true*?
  - If they adopt Rorty's notion of "truth as usefulness," then can someone who doesn't find their critique useful dispense with them?
  - If they really mean that their critique is objectively useful for all people, then doesn't this amount to saying that it's *true* (in the sense of *corresponding with reality*)?
- The postmodern analysis of power and its relation to truth is stated too strongly.
  - This analysis is correct in many cases.
  - But the intrinsic connection between knowledge claims and power doesn't help us decided whether it is true or false.
- Foucault's protestations about the connection between knowledge and power also indict the postmodern stance. For example, Rorty thinks that "true" Christians are insane and consequently shouldn't be allowed to take part in liberal society.
- Pragmatism's replacement for truth, the concept of usefulness, just doesn't capture what most people mean when they say that something "is true."
- Some aspects of postmodern skepticism really assume the truth of certain key tenets of modernism.
  - Consider the position: "Since all knowledge is rooted in cultures and language, and since pure objectivity and certainty aren't possible, we must conclude that all knowledge is subjective. Thus, we should discard the idea of truth as correspondence." (See note on *correspondence theory of truth* in next section.)
  - But why assume that we must achieve complete objectivity and certainty before we have genuine knowledge? (This assumption goes back to Descartes.)

Summary: If the postmodern claim is that *all* metanarratives should be mistrusted, they are themselves making a universal claim—a claim we should presumably mistrust. Perhaps a true metanarrative *does* exist. If it does, we are wise to seek it.

8 Truth, Knowledge, and Belief

Distinguishing *truth* and *knowledge*:

- *Truth* is a characteristic of statements that properly describe aspects of the real world: *correspondence theory of truth.*
  - Is a definition of what we mean by "is true."
  - Is not a method for testing truth claims.
  - Does not depend on anyone *knowing* the truth.
- *Knowledge* denotes a person's proper understanding of the true nature of reality.
  - Knowledge by acquaintance: e.g., I know what blue looks like.
  - Knowledge of true statements: e.g., I know that "my name is John."

For a belief to count as knowledge for a person, it must meet three conditions:

1. Knowledge must be *true.* (But how can we tell what is true? See later sections.)
2. Knowledge must be *believed.*
3. Knowledge requires *some other fact* that legitimates the knower's holding that belief. (What counts as legitimating facts is hotly debated!)

9 Forming and Testing Beliefs

- How should we set the standards for assessing what counts as knowledge?
- Key criteria: Particularism, rationality, and evidence.

But first, consider methodism:

- Recall that Descartes's approach posited too high standards.
- Descartes followed *methodism:* A person knows a particular true belief only if he arrives at that knowledge by following a correct *method.*
- Methodism may seem promising, but is fundamentally flawed: infinite regress.

Particularism:

- Start by assuming that we know particular things; e.g., that we have adequate vision or hearing. Assume beliefs are innocent until proven guilty.
- Difficulties arise when we run into contrary evidence. In this case, we go back to testing procedures that help us figure out which of the things our belief-forming processes are telling us is actually correct. See next point.

Rationality:

- Our beliefs should be rational.

- *Coherence:* a negative test (necessary condition). Can be used to *guarantee* that some beliefs are false.

Evidence:

- Our beliefs should fit with evidence. If a belief doesn't fit with a whole hose of data *we take to be true*, we have good reason to think that belief is false.
- We are *not* saying that every belief must be proved by evidence before it counts as knowledge (which would force us back to evidentialism, an intellectual cul-de-sac).

Networks of truth-claims:

- Interdependent particular beliefs that form a web or body of knowledge.
- Examples: large-scale scientific theories, historical theories, even religious convictions.
- Large-scale models often compete with each other to see which one does the best job of explaining all the facts.
- With limited evidence, competing models may do equally well (e.g., heliocentric and geocentric models of the solar system).
- With sufficient evidence, one model will defeat another.
- Complex explanatory models form ongoing programs of research and investigation.
- Not only explain what we know, but guide us to what we don't yet know.
- Testing large-scale constellations of beliefs isn't simple—sometimes, it is impossible!
- Remember 1 Cor. 13:12.

Conclusion: Gathering knowledge isn't always easy, but it's amazing how much we can learn through carefully using all the strategies we have available.

10 Knowledge and the Intellectual Virtues

Warning: This is going to feel a little fuzzy.
It is important *how* we come to know.

- Knowledge requires true belief plus some account of that belief (something that legitimates the belief).
- What is this feature that, when added to true belief, constitutes knowledge? There are few things that scholars disagree about more!
- We focus on the relationship between knowledge and the *intellectual virtues*.

Intellectual virtues:

- Characteristic of a person who acts in a praiseworthy manner in the process of forming beliefs.

- Examples: honesty, courage, diligence, open-mindedness.
- Being intellectually honest means making a fair appraisal of the evidence at hand, dedicating effort to reaching all conclusions, admitting personal biases that affect beliefs, and seeking to override or reduce those biases.
- Being intellectually courageous means wiling to take the minority positions when the evidence points in that direction.
- Being intellectually diligent means investigating personal beliefs with rigor.

Practicing intellectual virtues:

- Intellectual virtues are not simply a matter of skill.
  - More to do with what a person *does with* abilities or skills.
- Intellectual virtues don't happen naturally.
  - Arise from habits. The more we practice them, the more a part of us they become.
- Intellectual virtues connect directly to the motivations of the one employing them.
  - A person must come to believe something out of proper intentions.

Virtue-based epistemology:

- Knowledge is *true belief that is reached or acquired through an act of virtue.*
- Knowledge isn't just an issue of whether evidence exists for specific belief at a particular time, but an issue of *how a person goes about gathering evidence.*
- Questions to ask ourselves:
  - Did I form this belief in a way that reflects praiseworthy habits of belief formation and testing over time?
  - Or did I form this belief in a manner that reflected slipshod handling of the evidence or haphazard reasoning processes?
- Overcomes postmodern skepticism by ensuring that we treat evidence honestly, overcome biases toward our own culture, and refuse to misuse evidence to gain power or to pretend that our own pet beliefs are superior.
- Work to understand the viewpoints of others, through dialogue with those who actually hold different viewpoints.
- Not easy to apply!
- Even if properly applied, different people may come to different conclusions. But what is a better alternative?

11 Religious Knowledge

- Through an intellectually virtuous manner, we can arrive at genuine knowledge of God.
- Rejecting all religious knowledge *just because it's religious* is sheer prejudice.
- *Demarcation strategy*:
  - Draw a boundary between whole classes of knowledge for the purpose of rejecting one whole class of beliefs.
  - Doomed: there is no neat and tidy line. Either rule out too much or too little.
  - Not every religious idea is false, and not every scientific proposal is true.
- Better to test individual claims one by one.

"Hiddenness of God" problem:

- Why doesn't God make his existence more obvious?
- Some kinds of knowledge are just less obvious than others. Why?
  - Because of varying complexity.
  - Because we don't know what to look for.
  - Because we don't have the necessary intellectual skills.
- We have to *learn how to learn*.

Knowing God?

- Yuri Gagarin's proclamation of atheism (because he didn't see God when in space). The simple problem here is that God isn't the sort of being of whom we should expect a visual sighting!
- The evidence we seek must be appropriate to the intended object of knowledge.
- The Bible says that God isn't particularly interested in having people merely believe that he exists (James 2:19).
- What does He want? For us to depend on Him, trust Him, and commit ourselves to Him, and to have a relationship to Him.
- Is there reasonable evidence for God, but people miss? Yes (e.g., feeding of 5000; many people only wanted a "free lunch!")
- Intelligent design (lots of books on this topic). Of course, it doesn't *absolutely prove* that God exists, but we've already dismissed this requirement. But evidence like this strongly suggests that denying or ignoring the existence of an intelligent designer is hazardous at best.

Why do people miss evidence?

- Human knower's personal qualities (e.g., attitudes, assumptions, experiences).

- Lack of practice (e.g., wine tasting).
- Human knower's purposes/values. "The pure in heart see God." (Matthew 5:8)

Conclusion: If God exists and wants to enter into intimate relationship with me, then rationality and wisdom declare to me that I am wise to become the sort of person who can experience this reality. I should develop the needed intellectual virtues, for knowledge of God is the greatest treasure of all.

12 Conclusion

> If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.

C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight Of Glory And Other Addresses*, 1949.